

The choices of faith

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[0 : 0 0] As always, there is a sermon outline available. If you don't have it in front of you, it is available for download from our website, and you could find that useful to follow along. But as always, even more useful is to have the text of Genesis 13 in front of you.

It will probably be a few minutes before we look at the text in the sermon. I will make some introductory remarks first. But once we get to the text, we will be engaged in a close and contextual reading.

So do make sure that it is open in front of you, and you can follow along and see how the text comes out. And just like last week, I am going to use Abram and Abraham interchangeably.

So please don't get distracted by that. Let's ask God for his help to illuminate our minds and hearts. Father, we need your help. We need your help always whenever we come to your word.

That your word might not just be intellectual and propositional knowledge, but that your word here is indeed your voice speaking to us, setting our hearts on fire to live for you, to love you, to seek, to honor you.

[1 : 0 6] So Father, please would you set our hearts on fire again, that we might want to follow you all our lives, and indeed to exercise true faith. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. Last week, we saw the promise of a new beginning. God was beginning to work in Abraham's life as he called him to leave behind everything he had ever known to go to a land he would show him.

He promised to bless him and to make him a blessing to the world. And we saw that the necessary response to this new beginning, initiated by these promises, was to believe God, turn around, and go.

By faith, Abraham was to answer God's call. And in this sense, we see a model of the Christian life. It is a life characterized by repentance and faith.

But the question then arises, how do I know if I'm currently living a life of faith? How do I know if I'm still responding rightly? How can I tell if I'm trusting Jesus?

[2 : 1 0] It's a good question. A question that I sometimes get as a pastor. And it's an important question because a lack of clarity on what it means to live a life of faith could potentially lead to great uncertainty and therefore to insecurity.

And in our part of the world, sometimes there is a lack of clarity on what biblical faith actually is. And so that's where I want to begin this morning, with the confusion over faith.

That's going to be the first thing I want to briefly examine as a way into our passage before we look at the text proper. So firstly, the confusion over faith.

Faith, the theologian Gerald Bray says, is one of those words that everyone thinks they understand, but few people bother to define. For many people, faith is about believing regardless of the facts.

And so for example, someone might declare that they have faith that their child could do no wrong, even if the evidence clearly shows. Otherwise, even if everyone knows that the kid is bullying others at school or something like that.

[3 : 19] And so in this way of thinking, faith is all about an act of resolve and willpower. If I believe hard enough, it will be true. And this kind of thinking pops up in all kinds of ways in Christian circles as well.

You might have never heard of Kenneth Hagin, his past on now, but his influence still pops up in some of the teaching we find circulating in Malaysia. Now this is what he writes on the screen.

The key to the God kind of faith is believing with the heart and confessing with the mouth. And you think, oh, what's wrong with that? That sounds like the Bible.

But in the next few lines on the screen, he says this, our lips can make us millionaires or keep us paupers. Our lips can make us victors or keep us captives.

We can fill our words with faith or fill our words with doubt. Our faith will never rise above the words of our lips. And so faith here is conceived as a kind of creative power functioning through human speech to bring about a particular kind of reality, in this case, riches or success.

[4 : 36] It's a power to harness. And you can see this in the writings of Joel Osteen as well. For example, in his recent book, The Power of I Am, Osteen writes this.

Here's the principle. Whatever follows the I am will eventually find you. When you say, I'm so clumsy, clumsiness comes looking for you.

I'm so old, wrinkles come looking for you. I am so overweight, calories come looking for you. It's as though you're inviting them. Whatever you follow the I am with, you're handing it an invitation, opening the door, and giving it permission to be in your life.

The good news is, you get to choose what follows the I am. When you go through the day saying, I am blessed, blessing comes looking for you.

I am talented, talent comes looking for you. You may not feel up to par, but when you say, I am healthy, health starts heading your way. I am strong.

[5 : 39] Strength starts tracking you down. You're inviting those things into your life. A life of faith, therefore, in this kind of thinking, is all about speaking and declaring things into being.

It's about activating a certain God-given power by which you are able to claim things, certain things to meet certain needs, such as your right to healing or your right to that dream job.

And that's why in some circles, you hear leaders keep asking you to declare this or declare that. Because to them, this is what a life of faith is all about.

It's about appropriating a kind of divine force to achieve your best life now. But I want to suggest this morning that Genesis 13 will present us with a far more biblical picture of the life of faith, one that is at odds with the teaching I just mentioned.

As we explore Genesis 13, we'll discover why our very best Bible teachers and theologians over the centuries have often defined faith this way, as receiving and resting on God or Christ alone.

[6 : 59] Faith is fundamentally about trusting God, about believing in His reliability, His ability, His truthfulness. It's about entrusting ourselves to Him.

And Genesis 13 will show us what the life of faith looks like primarily via two characters, Abram and Lot. Look at the end of last week's passage in 12 verse 20.

We're told that Pharaoh sends Abram back to the Negev with his wife and everything he had. And then in 13 verse 1, we find what seems to be a redundant sentence as the narrator once again repeats that Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev with his wife and everything he had.

But this time, the narrator adds something additional. And Lot went with him. And that's because the narrator now wants us to focus on him together with Abraham in chapter 13.

More specifically, we'll be focusing on the choices they make. But just before we do that, let's look at the larger context in which their choices take place.

[8 : 13] And so that's the second thing I want to examine this morning, the context of faith. The context of faith. Now, when we think about what sort of things test our faith, we tend to think of difficulties and trials, don't we?

We think of illnesses and financial struggles or maybe even some sort of persecution as the kind of things that challenge our trust in God.

And of course, that is often true. Trials often bring us to a point where we have to decide whether we are looking to God or not. Just think last week of the famine.

Because of that famine, Abraham moved from faith to fear and made many foolish and sinful decisions. Think of our current pandemic.

And I'm sure in our honest moments, we too have to acknowledge that we've probably made decisions that were not pleasing to the Lord, decisions motivated by fear or a desire to be in control.

[9 : 16] And so without a doubt, trials can test our faith. I know a number of you are facing such trials right now. But did you know too that earthly blessings test our faith just as much?

At the beginning of this chapter, there's no longer any famine. If anything, there's feasts. 13 verse 2 tells us that Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.

And then Lot, verse 5, who was moving about with Abraham, also had flocks and herds and tents. Now in Abraham's day, wealth wasn't signified so much by the number of digits in your bank account, but by how many animals you had.

And by that measure, Abraham and Lot were doing very well. According to the standards of the world, they were both very successful. But there's a problem, verse 6.

Given the large increase in their flocks, they came across the problem of limited resources. There just wasn't enough pasture to go around. They were dwelling in Canaan, but the specific area they were staying in wasn't big enough for both of their herds.

[10 : 34] And so success led to strife. Now, many of us during this pandemic will understand how sharing the same space with another person with nowhere to go for an extended period of time can so easily lead to arguing and quarreling.

And it was to save the seven for Abram's herders and lots. Presumably, each group were staking their claim on the best pasture for their animals.

And this led to animosity. The problem, then, is not created by failure, but by success. And the problem is not merely a logistical one.

It's a theological problem. For it's a problem that will put their faith in God to the test. Did you notice that little statement in verse 7?

The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. Now, it might seem like a throwaway line, but it's actually pretty important because it reminds us that right now, the land of Canaan belongs to neither Abraham nor Lot.

[11 : 47] It's still occupied by others. And yet, back in Genesis 12 verse 7, God had promised Abraham's descendants this land.

And so, how would that promise now inform the choices that Abram and Lot must make? How would they proceed to resolve this problem? How would they regard the land they see before them?

Will they do so with the eyes of faith? Or will they not? But just before we look at their respective choices, I want us to pause here and draw out a couple of implications.

First of all, I want us to notice how a common misconception about the life of faith is corrected by verses 5 to 7. You see, very often, we think of success and wealth as visible indicators of true faith.

We take them to be the rewards of faith. So, if you are successful in the eyes of the world because you've managed to overcome the odds to become a top entrepreneur, or you've reasoned through the ranks to become a respected community leader, well, that must be because you're blessed and you must be blessed because you had strong faith.

[13 : 12] That's how we often make the link. If you're experiencing earthly success, you must be exercising true faith. But Genesis 13 doesn't see it that way.

Genesis 13 doesn't draw a direct correlation between these two men's faith and their riches. Don't forget, the only reason Abraham was rich was because he enriched himself of Pharaoh by basically prostituting his wife.

As we saw clearly last week, it certainly wasn't because he was faithful. Now, at this point, Abraham and Lot's wealth are simply a matter of fact.

And because their wealth now presents them with a problem, it also presents them with choices to make. So in Genesis 13, their wealth and the issues it generates is simply the context for the choices of faith they must now make, not the outcome of their faith.

And so we must draw the link between these things correctly. And second of all, I want us to make a general observation about life from the specifics of verses 5 to 7.

[14 : 35] You see, verses 5 to 7 is so often how life goes, isn't it? We encounter a situation, we then have to make a decision. That's how life goes.

Situation, decision, situation, decision, situation, decision. And as someone once quip, in every single thing you do, you are choosing a direction.

Your life is a product of choices. Life can't be lived on passive autopilot, not even as a Christian. Even followers of Jesus can't just let go, put in zero effort, and sail through life expecting God will automatically impress upon us the exact way to go, complete with precise details.

No, that's contrary to the teaching of scripture. In Philippians 2 verse 12 to 13 on the screen, you see that yes, God works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose, verse 13.

That's gloriously true, absolutely. And yet, verse 12, we are at the same time to keep working out our salvation. And so, a life of faith still requires us to exercise wisdom in conformity with the known purposes of God and to act accordingly.

[16 : 02] It requires us to make the choices of faith, not to sit back in faith. A life of faith is active, not passive.

And that brings us to the third thing we want to examine this morning. The choices of faith. What are the choices that Abraham and Lot will make?

And what would that show us about what it means to live a life of faith? We'll look at verses 8 to 9 in a little more detail later, Abraham. But for now, let's just notice there what Abraham proposes.

Verse 8, Abraham said to Lot, let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives.

It's not the whole land before you. Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. Abraham recognizes the situation, looks to de-escalate, and seeks no further strife.

[17 : 07] He recognizes that for now, the best thing to do to keep the peace is to part ways. And so he makes a generous offer. Lot, he says, you get to choose.

You get first pick of where you want to go. No part of the land is off limits. I'll simply follow your lead. If you go left, I'll go right.

If you go right, I'll go left. It's a generous offer. Mark with humility. And so what will Lot choose? Well, that's what we'll look at first.

The choice of Lot. As Abram and Lot speak, it appears that they're on a mountain of sorts, which overlooks one end of the Jordan Valley.

And like an eager millennial looking to buy his first home, Lot lifts up his eyes, and verse 10, he looks around. He sees, he surveys, and he makes a judgment about what he sees.

[18 : 15] And what he saw was pleasing to his eye. He saw the plain of Jordan. He saw fertile ground. It was well watered.

It was unlikely he'll ever suffer from famine there. It was perfect for raising a flock. In fact, you could almost say it was heaven on earth.

After all, verse 10, it's like the garden of the Lord. It's like Eden. That's the judgment Lot made. And it had good prospects for gaining wealth, since not only would his flock most likely thrive there, but verse 12, he was near the cities, which meant possibilities for trade.

It was obvious. If you want your best life now, that's where you should go. And so at first glance, it seems as if Lot is making the sensible choice.

He's making the most of the opportunity he's been given. Hey, doesn't it look like God is opening a door for me here, so I should walk through it.

[19 : 24] Isn't that faith? Except, look a little closer at verses 10 to 13 again, and it will soon become clear that the problem is that Lot saw, but he didn't really see.

Look a little closer and you can see that the narrator gives us plenty of indications that Lot's choice wasn't so good after all. For one thing, notice what else Lot compares the land he's seeing to.

he looked around, he saw, and he noticed, this part of the land is like the land of Egypt. Now, Egypt, of course, is an attractive destination in general.

It's the rice bowl of the region. But, comparing a part of the promised land to a land that is not part of the promise, not a promising sign, no pun intended.

especially in light of what we saw last week. But, verse 11 gets more ominous. Notice the direction Lot goes in.

[20 : 38] He sets out towards the east. Now, in the book of Genesis, moving east is never a good sign. Back in Genesis 3, it's the direction Adam and Eve move in after they are banished from Eden.

In Genesis 4, it's where Cain has to go. after he murders Abel. In Genesis 11, verse 2, it's the direction the builders of the Tower of Babel were moving towards, just before they execute their arrogant plan to displace God.

Later on in Genesis, it's the direction Jacob hits in after he deceives his father and brother. So, let's just say going eastwards always has negative connotations in Genesis.

It symbolically represents a move away from God's dwelling. Or if you want further clues in the text, well, in 12 verse 8, we're told that I lies in the east, while Bethel lies in the west.

Bethel in Hebrew means the house of God. And what does I mean in Hebrew? A heap of ruins.

[21 : 57] And so Lot is moving away from the house of God to a place of ruins. It's all there in the text. But here's the thing.

Right now, it doesn't look like a place of ruin. Right now, it looks like a place of refreshment. It looks like a place for advancement. But the problem is that Lot is applying all the wrong criteria to his choice.

He's considered the economic dimension of his decision. But never once does he ever consider the spiritual dimension. He saw that the soil was fertile and the water was plentiful.

But he didn't see that the spiritual condition of his new neighbour was woeful. But for the narrator, that is the most significant thing about the place.

Look at verse 13. Now, the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. It's a spiritually dangerous place.

[23 : 04] God's God's God's God's God's God's God's God's promises to Abraham. He knows that to stick with God's promises, he should be trying his best to stick with Abraham.

At the very least, he should let Abraham influence him. Perhaps he should have asked, Uncle Abraham, where do you think I should go? But nope, he moves to the very edge of Canaan.

For to be near Sodom is to be right on the edge. He's deliberately ignored or downplayed the influence Sodom could have on him.

He might have thought, oh, it'll be no problem. He might even have thought, oh, it'll be fun there. And don't worry, I can resist if things get out of hand.

I will never cross the line. Except that when you keep reading Genesis, Lot will eventually not just be on the edge of Canaan near Sodom, but he will actually be outside Canaan in Sodom.

[24 : 16] And for Lot, all this will end disastrously. His wife will be turned into salt. His daughters will fall into scandal. We'll see all this next month. And so Lot sees, but he never really sees.

He can see all the good stuff on the outside, but he can't discern all the dangers within. He sees a land like the garden of the Lord, like prosperous Egypt.

But the narrator tells us we should see something different. At the end of verse 10, this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

And so the narrator is giving us a heads up, that we should see this as a place that is under God's judgment and headed for destruction, because it is not a place oriented towards God.

But why does Lot never actually see? Why do we sometimes not see? Well, because God was not in the picture. There was no earnest desire to seek the will of God.

[25 : 26] Notice in verse 11, that Lot chose for himself. He walked by sight, not by faith. For what is a life of faith?

A life of faith is one where you do not simply choose for yourself. It's not one where you co-opt God to validate the choices you want to make.

It is not a life where you live dangerously, spiritually speaking, thinking that you can deliberately place yourself near temptation without falling to it. Instead, a life of faith is one that asks, what is the will of God here?

And Lot doesn't need to wait for a mystical vision to know the will of God? He already knows it because he knows the word of God. He knows the promises to Abraham.

He knows that this is the land that God has promised, not Sodom, not Gomorrah, not Egypt. And a life of faith is one that subsequently asks, how can I choose to obey the will of God, even when the alternatives look attractive?

[26 : 38] But Lot appears to never have asked the question. So my friends, do you see that to have faith means regularly making choices that align with the word of God?

A life of faith is a life that puts God's priorities first as spelled out in his word. It is a life in the words of Jesus himself that seeks first his kingdom and his righteousness.

A life of faith is not a life of seeking your best life now. And yet, how often do we make decisions? Often, we only consider how it will benefit us economically or socially or psychologically.

But do we ever consider how it will benefit or harm us spiritually? as a pastor, sometimes people who profess to follow the Lord ask me for advice about whether to move and take this job or that job.

And sometimes, I can see straight away that it will be disastrous for them spiritually to do so, even though the remuneration is good or the prospects for developing yourself is good.

[28 : 00] because maybe the job means that they will almost certainly never have any time to fellowship with God's people. Maybe the job will put particular pressures on them that I know will make it very difficult for them to grow in Christ.

But, of course, I can't make the decision for them, so I try to make them aware of the consequences spiritually speaking. But sadly, quite a number of them still do.

One or two of them weren't really looking for advice from me, but endorsement. And years later, they are almost always nowhere near the Lord.

My friends, walking by sight, not by faith, is never worth it. So that's the choice of Lot. But what about the choice of Abraham?

Well, that's what we'll look at next. The last time we saw Abraham, he didn't come out looking so good. But in Genesis 13, we see a transformation. Come back with me for a moment to verse 3 and 4, and let me read it.

[29 : 11] From the Negev, he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai, where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar.

There, Abraham called on the name of the Lord. Now, at first sight, this looks like nothing more than a travel itinerary. But look carefully at his route.

Abraham is retracing his steps. He's travelling on the same route as he first did in Genesis 12, verse 4 to 9, where he worshipped and called on the name of the Lord.

In fact, verses 3 to 4 make sure to draw our attention to that detail by talking about where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar.

This is the road of repentance. Abraham once again wants to walk the life of faith with God like he did before. Okay, you say, but what's the evidence?

[30 : 20] Well, let's come back to verses 8 to 9, where Abraham first made his offer to Lot. Now, what we need to realise here is that Abraham has seniority.

He is the de facto chief of the clan here. And don't forget, the land has been promised to him and his descendants, not Lot. And so Abraham could easily have pulled rank and said, Lot, you go away.

But he doesn't. You see, what Abraham is displaying here is a humble trust in God's providence. He doesn't cave into opportunism here. He doesn't try to manipulate the situation.

He is acting in the opposite way from the way he acted down in Egypt last week in 12 verses 10 to 20. He's secure enough to give Lot first choice because he trusts that God will look after him regardless of what Lot chooses.

There is no need to resort to deception. And because he trusts in God's providence, he's free to become the kind of peacemaker that Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount.

[31 : 35] And not only does Abraham trust in God's providence, he displays a humble trust in God's very word. In verse 14, Abraham is invited to look around just like Lot does in verse 9.

And what does he see? Verse 15 tells us, it is the land that God has promised to Abraham. It is the land that God will give to him and his offspring.

And from what we know of the geography, it probably doesn't look like the greatest land, especially compared to the fertile valley that Lot has just left for. It doesn't look like the garden of the Lord.

But just like back in Genesis 12, verse 4, when the word of God comes, Abraham obeys. He goes.

Once again, verse 18, he builds an altar. He worships in faith. For notice what Abraham does here in contrast to Lot. Lot looks eastward, sees fertile land, and thinks, that's like Eden, that's what I can turn it into.

[32 : 49] But Abraham looks at what God shows him and trusts. This is where God says Eden will be. That's what God promised to make it into.

For this will be the land where God himself dwells, as Numbers 35, verse 34 will later make clear. In a sense, both wanted paradise, as do we all.

But the difference is that one looked to himself to fashion paradise, whereas the other took God at his word and trusted God to eventually fulfill his promise to provide a new Eden.

He walked by faith, not by sight. You see, how do you know you're exercising faith? You do so when you're trusting God in Christ by trusting him to give what he has promised.

That's what Abraham did. But here is something important also to remember. You are not trusting God if you are looking to him to give you something he has never promised you.

[33 : 58] That's not what biblical faith is. Sometimes we think that faith is about trusting that God will surely give us that job or that relationship or that opportunity.

But that's not biblical faith because God never promised you that. Now, that doesn't mean that you can't talk to him and ask him for those kind of things. That doesn't mean that he doesn't give you those things.

But you can't claim those things because God has never promised you that if you study his word rightly. That would be a misapplication of these verses.

Abraham is trusting God for what God has specifically promised to give. In his case, the land. Not what he wants God to give.

I hope you can see the difference. So my brothers and sisters, how do you know if you're currently living a life of faith? How do you know if you're trusting Jesus?

[35 : 03] You know you're doing so when you've chosen to entrust yourself to God and chosen to believe the promises of the gospel whatever your circumstances.

And if you're not sure what those promises are, Ephesians 1 verse 3 to 14 is a good place to find out. Go back and read that section later. And you know that you're doing so when you choose to look to him to lead you to your new Eden, our future home in the new heavens and the new earth.

And in the meantime, you want to live how he wants you to, like Abraham here, in dependence and humility, being a peacemaker, not going near Sodom, and so on.

For a life of faith is a life when we make the choice to trust God to do what he says, even when the outcome doesn't seem secure to us, or when the ungodly alternative looks more attractive.

Let me say that again. A life of faith is a life when we make the choice to trust God to do what he says, even when the outcome doesn't look secure to us, or when the ungodly alternative looks more attractive.

[36 : 21] That is the true life of faith. And that way is only possible for us because the one we follow is the one who truly exhibited a life of faith.

You see, in Matthew 4, we find Jesus in the wilderness, and we find the devil taking him up to the highest point, to the mountain, just like Abraham and Lot here.

And each time, the devil says to Jesus, look around you, see, and at the end, he shows Jesus the kingdoms of this world.

And he says, you can have all this, just worship me. And Jesus could have walked by sight. He could have agreed. But Jesus didn't.

He walked by faith. Each time the devil told him to look, Jesus answered, it is written. Jesus went back to the word of God.

[37 : 21] He walked by faith, not by sight, taking God at his word. And he said that it is the will of God that only God should be worshipped. And so the response of Abraham has become the response of Jesus.

But Jesus, of course, is greater than Abraham. We have hardly begun the Abraham story, and we've already seen him fail. But Jesus lived the perfect life of faith.

When Jesus was here on earth, he never made a wrong choice. And it is his very life of faith we can now depend upon when we stand before God.

It is his very life of faith that enables us now to walk the life of faith. For this is what we are still to do. In Hebrews 11, verse 13, we are reminded, all these people in the Old Testament were still living by faith when they died.

They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. That included Abraham.

[38 : 30] And in one sense, we are in a better place than him because we've seen the great fulfillment of those Abrahamic promises in Jesus. We didn't just see them from a distance because we have the gospel promises.

Jesus. But in another sense, we are still like Abraham because we have yet to see the new Eden. We have yet to see Jesus face to face and we are still foreigners and strangers here.

But while we are strangers here, this is the word we can hang on to. My friends, if you are a Christian today, truly a Christian, 1 Peter 1 verse 8 to 9 is true of you.

Though you have not seen him, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

For you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. This is true of you. And therefore, 1 Peter 1 verse 13, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

[39 : 58] And so my friends, let's strive whether during a pandemic, in a famine, or even after a pandemic, in times of feasting, to live a life of faith.

Let's pray. Father, as we come before you now, will you help us to exercise true faith, help us to exercise biblical faith, faith as defined in your word.

Help us to trust you, to take you at your word, to study your word, to know the promises you have made to us, and also to know the promises you have not made to us, and that indeed, we might hang on to those promises, and in the meantime, choose to live a life that honour you.

Please help us every day, Lord, to make the right choices, choices that are in line with what you want for us. Father, we know that sometimes we don't do that, and so we seek your forgiveness.

We thank you that our relationship with you does not depend on the choices we make, but depends solely on Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life of faith.

[41 : 21] Thank you that we have that assurance. But will you help us as people who are now united to Christ, to indeed live for him, to indeed be proven faithful as we persevere even now in times of famine.

And will you help us not to make sure that when we arrive at times of feasting, not to let that distract or tempt us, but help us to keep walking the straight and narrow path, all the way to the end, to our new home.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.